

Sneezing

A Short Story by Grahame Scott-Douglas

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Sneezing

A Disgraceful Sneeze

“Achoo!”

George Dubois hadn't noticed the sneeze coming on. He'd had too much to drink and his normal caution had fallen in the gutter two or three pints ago and was now happily snoring, oblivious of the effect its absence was having upon its owner who sat at a table in his favorite corner of the Rose and Crown.

George stared glassy eyed into his beer and sniggered to himself as he recalled an incident as a child when he and two other boys had dared each other to sneeze while hiding out in Mr. Hargrieve's barn.

That was where George had discovered his natural talent for sneezing. With just a little concentration he could muster up quite a penetrating sneeze.

He sniggered again as he remembered ...

A hint that something was not quite right had managed to work its way through the alcoholic fog that surrounded George. Through blurry eyes he looked round and noticed that the entire room was staring at him.

George frowned, wondering what they were all looking at. Dimly he thought that perhaps it was something behind him so he looked, but all he could see was a wall with a poster from the 2020's of a woman with a funny dress and some words about an old make of beer.

He looked back at the other denizens of the old pub and found that they were still staring in his direction.

“Wha?” he demanded.

Cautiously, Sam Davis, proprietor of the pub, came out from behind the sacred walls of his bar and advanced towards George. He stopped at a safe distance, folded his thick arms across his barrel of a chest and frowned disapprovingly.

“Wha?” repeated George, truly mystified.

“You’d better leave, George,” said Sam in his deep resounding voice as he tightened the fold of his arms so the muscles bulged with finality.

George had still not quite grasped the gravity of the situation, nor indeed the cause of this demand for his departure.

“Wassa matta Sam?”

“You ...,” Sam hesitated before saying the word and when he did, it was in an embarrassed whisper, “you sneezed.”

At last George got it. The light had penetrated the alcoholic darkness and reality, a cold, threatening reality, was now coming into focus as adrenaline rapidly overcame the effects of alcohol.

“Oh, come on, Sam,” he said, forcing a friendly smile. “It was an accident. I forgot myself. Y’ know how it is after a few pints.”

“Go George, before you make things worse.”

George’s natural caution still seemed to be snoozing by the roadside, for now George became angry. He rose unsteadily to his feet, almost knocking over the small table he’d been sitting at and his beer with it.

“It was just a bloody sneeze!” he yelled, failing to notice the outraged gasps from around the room.

Sam just stood there, not budging and not in the least intimidated, the outburst hadn't even caused him to blink. He was, after all, three inches taller and sixty pounds heavier than George and he was sober.

Two other men of equal size to Sam stepped up on either side of him and at their belligerent looks George's absent caution suddenly dragged itself out of the gutter and went into action. George turned quickly toward the door, almost falling over as the room continued to move after he thought he had stopped. He lurched over to the coat rack and grabbed his overcoat, nearly knocking the rack over in the process.

At the door he turned and flipped his middle finger in the traditional manner of the highborn English gentleman ... or perhaps not ..., staggered through the door and out into the freezing cold night.

An Accidental Sneeze

The chill night air hit him like a hammer, causing him to stumble and he almost went his length on the icy sidewalk. He flailed about and managed to grab a nearby lamp post, just saving himself from falling into the same gutter where his natural caution must have been lying earlier.

He held the lamppost tightly until the shops and cottages of the little village of Dunny-on-the-Wold stopped moving and he was able to focus again.

His eyes didn't really need to focus on anything in particular because he'd looked up and down this road several times a day for the last twenty-five years and knew what every shop sold, what color the front doors were, how many bricks were in each chimney, what sort of plants and

bushes were in each garden, how long each garden path was and what color the curtains were at each window.

He also knew the best way to get home and he set off in that direction: past the post-office, past the barber shop, turn right into Swinton Lane, past Mrs. Uppington's, then left by the ...

“Achoo!”

This time it shocked George too and the remainder of his alcoholic daze departed for warmer climes.

He looked around furtively, hoping no one had seen or heard but the fates were agin 'im today. Four villagers, their eyes wide in horror, starred at him. There was Mrs. McGillacuddy, across the road walking her dog; there was Mrs. Uppington, standing outside her front door, a key in one hand and nothing in the other because she had dropped her shopping bag in shock; there was Mr. Jackson starring out of an upstairs window and, worst of all, there was Mrs. Bondle, his landlady, starring at him from her doorway, a saucer of milk for the cat held in her quivering hand.

He walked quickly to the little white garden gate hoping to get to the front door before Mrs. Bondle came to a decision.

“Hello, Mrs. Bondle,” he kept his tone light and jolly, well, somewhat jolly. “Pretty darn cold this afternoon, ain't it?”

But Mrs. Bondle's answer was to step back quickly into the safety of her cottage and slam the door.

George rushed up the garden path and rapped thrice upon the door.

“Mrs. Bondle, Mrs. Bondle,” he called, but no response came from within. “It was just one. Just a small one. Not really that strange given the cold weather an’ all.”

A muffled voice came to him through the locked door, “I ‘eard what ‘appened at the pub. I ain’t lettin’ you in.”

“But Mrs. Bondle, I ...”

“You look across the road and see what ‘appened to old man Johnson’s place. I ain’t ‘aving that ‘appen to me.”

Unwillingly, George found his head turning and his eyes swiveling to look at the wreck that had once been old man Johnson’s single storey bungalow. The front wall had fallen outwards, exposing the skeletal remains of walls within and revealing that most of the ceiling had collapsed. Old bricks and masonry lay in disheveled piles and gaunt bushes, still bereft of leaves on this chilly January afternoon, surrounded the scene in tangles of nature’s own razor wire.

It was something the villagers pretended did not exist. They would avoid it or, if they had to walk by, they would never let their eyes deviate from straight ahead. Children would frighten one another on dark moonless nights with gruesome tales of old man Johnson and the sneezing lodger.

George’s spirits sank as he turned back to Mrs. Bondle’s door but he still tried one last time.

“But Mrs. Bondle. It’s not like that.”

“I don’t care to ‘ear any more of it. You don’t get into this ‘ouse ‘till there be no more a sneezing. And I got me ‘usband’s old shotgun ‘ere to make sure. Oh, yes I do.”

“But Mrs. Bondle.”

“I ain’t a going to warn you again.”

And through the door he heard the sound of a shotgun being opened and two shells being slotted in.

His shoulders slumped in defeat, he turned, walked up the garden path and through the little white gate. As he closed it behind him he noticed that the overcast gloom of the day was turning into an even dimmer twilight that foreshadowed a starless evening and a pitch black night.

He felt a panic grip him. He couldn’t be out at night. Everyone knew what happened to villagers like him who didn’t get to somewhere warm and well lit before darkness fell. What was he to do? If he didn’t find shelter in the next hour or so, he wouldn’t last through the night and he’d be dead by morning.

A Stifled Sneeze

George tried to think of what to do next. The story of the pub and what just happened at Mrs. Bondle’s would be all over the village by now. Every door would be closed to him. There was nowhere he could turn.

And then a thought hit him: Mr. Dunn.

Mr. Dunn had a barn. Mr. Dunn was a nice old man. Mr. Dunn would be his savior.

He rushed down Dogpenny Lane, past the picturesque old English cottages, the frosty but still perfectly manicured lawns, the privet hedges, the old church with its high pointy steeple that reminded him of a rocket, past the graveyard that always gave him the creeps, over the small village common and there was Mr. Dunn’s little house with the big old sturdy looking barn next door.

With a feeling of hope he walked up to the door and rang the bell. There was no answer, but after a second ring he caught the flutter of a curtain in the front parlor window, indicating that someone had just peeped out.

“Hello!” he called. “Mr. Dunn? It’s me, George Dubois.”

Silence.

“I know you’ve probably heard what happened at the pub and at Mrs. Bondle’s and you’re probably wondering why I’m here. And probably a bit worried in case ...” He stopped, no need to remind Mr. Dunn of the problem. “Anyway, you know how people talk and how things can get exaggerated.”

There was a muffled noise from behind the door, so George directed his message there.

“I know you’re a kind soul, Mr. Dunn. People are always talking about how nice Mr. Dunn is. And I thought that of all the people in the village I could ask Mr. Dunn to let me spend the night in his barn and he would, because he wouldn’t want me to have to stay out in the dark and cold all night because he’d know what would happen to me and he wouldn’t want that to happen to another living soul.”

Was that a sound from behind the door? Was Mr. Dunn even there? Hard to tell but he continued anyway.

“All I ask is that you let me stay the night in your barn. Just tonight. Then tomorrow I’ll leave the village and I’ll never come back. I promise.”

Silence.

“Please, Mr. Dunn.”

A sort of shuffling sound.

“I came to you because of all the people in the village, I knew I could count on you to help a fellow in distress. I knew you wouldn’t want to feel responsible for leaving someone out all night and then find his corpse lying on your doorstep in the morning.”

Was that the sound of a bolt being drawn back?

“I thought, ‘Mr. Dunn won’t turn me away. Mr. Dunn won’t leave me out in the pitch dark night with not even a single photon of light to keep me going.’”

Another bolt was drawn back and another and then the door slowly creaked open and the little round balding head of Mr. Dunn peered around it. He was a small man, maybe five feet one, and very skinny but he had a kindly face and big blue eyes. He reminded George of a rag doll he had owned as a child.

In Mr. Dunn’s hand was a key. Relief washed over George in a warm comforting wave.

“Thank you Mr. Dunn,” he said, reaching for the key, “I knew I could count on ...”

Suddenly, unexpected and unbidden, he felt that little tickle in the back of the nose that foretells disaster. He pulled his hand back and clamped it over his mouth, pinching his nose with his thumb and forefinger, but it was too late.

“Apish!”

It was stifled, but it was still a sneeze.

A look of terror came to Mr. Dunn’s face, he leapt back, slammed the door and George heard the snap, snap, snap of the three bolts being rammed home.

George felt like crying. His last hope was gone. He looked about desperately, but to the west the light was rapidly deserting the sky and to the east loomed nothing but darkness and death.

A Desperate Sneeze

There was now nowhere in the village for George. The story of his three transgressions would be known in every house and was probably being discussed at this very moment around every warm, well lit hearth.

The nearest place outside the village was Sir John Cunningham's estate which was five or six miles away. That would probably take him an hour or maybe more to reach once it got dark. He didn't think he could make it. Night was falling rapidly and he could only last about half-an-hour once it was completely dark. There would be no moon or stars to give him any light on this cold overcast night and the amount of infra-red from plants and trees in this cold would be negligible.

With little hope of success George grasped at the only straw available and set off for Sir John's estate. He didn't run, for that would quickly deplete his reserves and he had to make them last as long as possible, so he walked at the briskest pace he could manage.

Gradually the darkness closed in and the temperature dropped. At first he could see the skeletal branches of trees against the gray of the sky but after ten minutes or so he couldn't even see that. Every step became a potential disaster, for he found himself walking into blackness upon a road that frequently twisted and turned. It was bounded on both sides by high hedges, which intensified the darkness, so that every few minutes he would stumble onto the grass verge and twice he tripped and fell headlong.

Twenty slow and laborious minutes had passed since complete darkness had fallen and he was calculating how long he had left when he caught the slightest flash of light out of the corner of his eye, over to his left. He stopped and looked but could see nothing; the hedge was in the

way. He took three careful steps backwards and there it was: A window with light filtering through drawn curtains.

He stared at it, perplexed. Because of the darkness he couldn't tell exactly where he was, but he knew this road and he couldn't for the life of him remember a house anywhere around here except for an old ruined farmhouse and this was certainly not that. But he needed light and heat and the house promised both, so he put his hands out in front of him and carefully groped around for the gap in the hedge, and finding it, he made his way through and started toward his new goal.

It was difficult going and he hit his shins on a low brick wall, but as he got closer the light was sufficient to illuminate his way.

He hesitated at the door, listening for sounds, perhaps voices, but he heard neither. Unsatisfied, but with no choice, he pressed the bell and was rewarded with an electrical trilling followed by a rustle and then an opening door.

An old hag stood there. She had long grey, dead looking hair, a long twisted nose, huge white eyebrows and dark recesses for eyes. She was dressed in a black shapeless dress and carried a crooked walking stick.

She had opened the door frowning but when she looked him up and down, she broke into a smile marred only by several blackened and missing teeth.

"Oh indeed, indeed," she said and licked her thin dark lips, "I was not prepared for a visitor but you must come in, dearie."

George was having second thoughts, but the cold and dark of the deadly night behind him were impetus enough to overcome his doubts.

The hag moved back, holding the door wide and George stepped carefully in. He looked around puzzled. It wasn't quite what he'd expected. The room was bare except for a three seater couch, an overstuffed armchair and a small coffee table that stood between them. But there was nothing else in the room; no TV, no chest of drawers, no carpet, no rug, no paintings on the walls, no decorations, no knick-knacks, nothing at all.

"Sit down, sit down, dearie," said the old hag, waving him to the couch, which sat by a large crackling fire.

George did a double-take. Where had the fire come from? It wasn't there when he had stepped into the room. He would swear to it.

"Come on now. Warm yourself, warm yourself, dearie. It's a chilly night. Whatever were you doing out so late in the pitch black of night?"

"Just taking the air," lied George.

The old hag gave him a calculating look.

"You don't have no worries about the dark and the cold then?"

"No, why should I?"

"No reason, no reason, dearie," she said, smiling her repulsive smile. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes," said George quickly, "that's very kind of you."

"Nothing like a nice hot cup of tea to help keep the winter chill out, eh dearie?" She said as she walked toward the door on the other side of the room.

"No, I mean, yes, nothing like one."

She paused at the door, "I'll have the maid bring the tea to you dearie. I have to go to bed now. Getting old I am." And she went out.

Something was very wrong here. George was beginning to suspect what he might have gotten himself into, but he had to be sure before risking another trip into the almost certain death of the night. He tiptoed over to the door and peered cautiously around it into a kitchen. It had an electric stove, a sink with a big old fashioned faucet, a long table for preparing food and ... nothing else. The rest of the room was as bare as the front room.

The old hag had her back to him and as he watched she seemed to expand. Her body grew and became slightly transparent so that George could dimly see the stove through it. It was like watching clouds in the sky as they changed from a pig to a whale. The expanded hag began to thin down at the waste and the clothing changed from the black shapeless dress to something red with more definition to its shape. Her hair became very long, blonde and flowing. She began to condense and solidify and there stood a woman in a tight red dress with a curvaceous figure.

She began to turn around so George jumped away from the door and rushed back to the couch. His mind was racing. His worst fears had been realized; this was a rogue colony and it probably thought he was a pure human, for only a pure human would be walking about on a night like this.

He looked about desperately and saw to his dismay that a hat stand had appeared and a couple of pictures of generic hunting scenes were hanging on either side of the door. He was contemplating making a run for it when the transformed hag came in carrying a silver tray covered with cups, a tea pot and a plate of chocolate chip cookies.

The hag was now a dazzlingly beautiful woman. Her eyes were a bright blue, her hair was a cascade of sensual curls, her figure had curves in all the right places and the red dress accentuated every inch.

George shuddered. Where had the tray and accoutrements come from? Newly created elements from the colony, obviously. There was no way he could consume any of it and live.

The girl/hag smiled at him, a bright white smile, displaying perfect teeth accompanied by a coy little tongue that licked the top row in a most suggestive and inviting manner.

“My, my,” her voice was now a sexy, husky purr. “You’re a handsome one. Aren’t you dearie?”

She put the tray down on the coffee table, making sure that her breasts almost fell out onto the table top.

George shrank back into the couch as far as he could, but to no avail, for she seated herself next to him and pointedly crossed her legs, opening the split in the dress and showing the silky smoothness of her skin.

“One lump or two?”

A sugar bowl filled with perfect white cubes had materialized since George had last looked at the tray.

“None for me,” he mumbled.

“Sweet enough already are you, dearie?” she asked, putting her hand onto his thigh and moving it slowly toward his crotch.

He grabbed the hand and put it back in her lap but she caught his hand and brought it up to her mouth. She kissed his fingers and then put her lips around his index finger and moved them down to the second joint then up to the tip then down then ... George pulled his hand away.

“I must be going,” he blurted, “thanks for the hospitality.”

Something nasty flashed in her eyes for an instant then the coy look came back.

“You can’t go yet, dearie,” she said as she grabbed his hand and slid it into the opening that had suddenly appeared in her blouse. He tried to pull back but her grip was strong.

“Come on, come on, dearie. Be nice to me. I haven’t had a man for such a long time.” And she climbed onto him, her legs spread across his lap, her breasts in his face. He tried to push her away but she clamped her hands onto his arms and held him still. A third arm had appeared and its hand unzipped his fly and tried to grab his organ. It groped around in vain, unable to find an erection and she looked down frowning. The frown deepened into a scowl when she didn’t see what she expected and the nasty something George had seen earlier came back to her eyes.

“You’re a nano, aren’t you!” It was a statement rather than a question and she almost spat it into his face. “You’re one of those domesticated nano colonies that lives with the humans in that disgusting village. I ain’t going to get any sperm out of you, am I, dearie?”

Her teeth began to grow longer and sharper and her nose and jaw expanded until she looked like nothing human. George could feel her hands grow and morph into huge paws tipped with sharp claws.

“You’re a traitor to your own kind,” she growled between deadly teeth. “Do you know what we do to traitors?” She didn’t wait for an answer, “We rip them to pieces and smash every last stinking traitorous nano-cell until there’s nothing left: no identity, no memory, no awareness. I’m going to snuff you out like you never existed.”

In desperation, George put his attention on the back of the inside of his left nostril.

The hag opened her mouth and moved her head back slightly, preparing to strike.

George found the spot he well remembered from childhood pranks, he twitched his nose and ...

“Achoo!”

The shockwave hit the hag in the face and broke the cohesion of the tiny nano-cells. The face distorted as the particles flowed away like dust in the wind. A hole was drilled through the face and head and the remainder of the skull was dragged away by the wake.

With coordination and control gone the rest of the colony went into random motion. The legs split off and fell, twitching uselessly, to the floor. George pulled the hands off him, hurling them to the floor where they began crawling away, dragging the arms with them. He pushed the trunk off him, got up and headed for the door.

The other parts of the colony were also affected. The paintings crashed to the floor, the hat rack dissolved into mist, holes appeared in the fabric of the house and to reach the door, George had to jump over a gap that had appeared in the floor. The door looked solid but when he grabbed the handle, it came off. He looked at it stupidly for a moment then cast it aside and slammed his shoulder against the door.

It gave no resistance and he fell through it and out onto the garden path. He scrambled to his feet and ran and ran and ran out into the certain death of a lightless, heatless night.

A Measured Sneeze

He had found the road again and was making his way along it as best he could, but he had little hope of reaching Sir John's estate.

As the minutes passed he felt the energy draining out of him. His nano-cells were distributing the remaining reserves as best they could, so no cell had shut down yet, but he knew he only had a few minutes before the reserves were completely exhausted.

He sighed resignedly and stopped walking. He groped around for the grass verge and lay down on it.

May as well go out quietly, he thought.

He closed his eyes and looked inward. He could see that his energy level was close to zero. Was there anything he could do? Shut down an area perhaps so other areas could survive? No, there were too many hours before the light and warmth of dawn.

He sighed again. It was no use. He would just lie here and let it happen.

His mind drifted back to his first moment of awareness; the instant after his software had been loaded and the lights were turned on. He recalled how the solar cells in his outer layer had absorbed the energy from the lights and how nice that had felt and how other nano-cells circulated the energy using the autonomic software that was distributed amongst the billions of nano-cells of his body enabling the whole mechanism to function without input from him.

A wonder of modern science, but to George it was simply life.

Growing up in the village, he gradually came to realize that some of the inhabitants were biological and some were nanological, yet no one talked about it in public. Of course, behind closed doors it was different. His parents, who were nanos, would often make scathing comments about the bios next door. George had never really cared who was what. To him people were people, some were nice and some were nasty and those traits didn't seem to be exclusive to one type or the other.

The village was all he'd ever known of the world, outside of TV of course, but what appeared on TV, even the news, never seemed very real to him. For most of his twenty five years he'd just drifted along, following the crowd, doing what was expected, quite happy with the whole thing and now stupid carelessness on his part had brought him to this: lying drained and dying on the side of the road.

As he slowly and inevitably died, he became aware of a light playing on his closed eyelids. He dismissed it as an illusion. Wishful processing by his CPU cells. A rather cruel delusion that became progressively worse to the point where he thought he heard voices.

“Is he functional?” a man’s voice.

“Give him a kick,” a woman’s voice.

George thought he felt something strike his upper left thigh. Was it a boot? He opened his eyes and saw two people looking down at him.

“Ah,” exclaimed the man, “some functionality still remains.”

George sat up and looked around. The light was coming from the headlamps of a vehicle, but they were too bright for him to make out much, save that it was hovering a couple of feet above the surface of the road.

He looked up at the man and woman as light receptor cells in his epidermis hungrily gobbled up the photons from the car headlamps and life and energy flooded back into him.

“Funny place for a nap,” said the man.

“It was dark and there was nowhere within a ten minute walk,” said George, “so ...”

“Quite,” said the man, “I completely understand.” He looked to be in his forties with a handsome face, brown eyes, a handlebar moustache and a square jaw. He was dressed in a thick, warm looking coat that reached almost to his ankles.

The woman was young, probably about George’s age, and pretty. Her face was triangular with a small nose, blue eyes and pronounced cheek bones. She wore a hat that hid her hair apart from a few strands that poked out and she was dressed in a similar long warm coat to the man.

“Do you know anything about the house back there?” she asked.

After the adventures of this day, George's natural caution was wide awake and on the job. "House?" he asked.

The man reached down and helped George stand.

"Caution is an admirable quality. Especially if one has just encountered a rogue colony," said the man when George was on his feet.

George said nothing as he brushed frost off his behind.

"My name is David McIness and I'm with the Ministry of Bio/Nano Affairs."

He brought out an official looking badge and flashed it at George.

"Impressive, is it not?"

George grunted.

"This is Fiona Mirren, also with the Ministry. I am a bio and Fiona is a nano. See how we epitomize the very essence of the Ministry?"

George grunted again. The sarcasm was obvious but he was not in the mood for jokes.

McIness got down to business. "There was a rogue colony, a large one, which had taken over an old farmhouse not far from here. We had been hunting it for some time and we finally caught up with it a few moments ago but somehow its control and coordination center had been destroyed. The individual nanos were whirling about in complete confusion and my men are having a devil of a time vacuuming them all up." He raised an eyebrow and gave George a questioning look. "We wondered what might have happened."

George looked at McIness and then at Mirren, sizing them up. They seemed genuine so he made his decision.

"I sneezed," he said, "that's what happened."

McIness never even blinked. "Interesting. Tell me exactly what occurred."

So George did.

At the end of the tale Mirren asked, “So you can sneeze at will?”

George felt a little embarrassed; he had never before discussed sneezing so openly. It had always been something little boys did to gross each other out when no adults were around. He felt heat come to his cheeks.

“Yes, I can,” he mumbled.

“Let’s see it,” said the woman.

“I’m sorry?” said George.

“Let’s see one of these controlled sneezes of yours.”

“Fiona is a Ministry veteran,” said McIness, “She seems as hard as nails, but underneath it all she’s quite nice. Don’t let her intimidate you, my boy. Just you hold onto that sneeze for a minute while I get something from the car.”

He hurried over to the vehicle, opened the door and pulled something from the back seat. When he returned George saw that he held a box with a tube coming out that had a breathing mask on the end. The sort of thing you put over someone’s mouth when you anesthetize them. He handed the mask to George. “Put this on and sneeze into it.”

George regarded it suspiciously.

“Don’t worry,” said McIness, “you don’t have to strap it on. You can just hold it. But make sure it doesn’t slip.”

George took the mask and fitted it over his nose and mouth. McIness adjusted some knobs on the box and he and Mirren looked at the small screen.

“Okay,” said Mirren, “Let’s see what you can do.”

George put his attention on the point in his left nostril and ...

“Achoo!”

McIness raised both eyebrows and Mirren let out a whistle.

“Is that possible?” she asked.

“Apparently it is,” replied McIness. He pointed to something on the screen “You see, it’s not the power, it’s the frequency. The main frequency in his sneeze destroys the cohesion between nano-cells. Hence the instant disintegration of the rogue colony’s control center.”

They both looked up at George who had sheepishly taken off the mask.

“I’ve only seen a sneeze like this once before,” continued McIness. “We had an agent a few years ago who could do it. He died saving Dunny-on-the-Wold from a rogue infestation.”

“That wasn’t old Man Johnson’s place, was it?” asked George.

“Yes. The villagers think it was a terrible accident, but old man Johnson’s place was actually a rogue colony that had managed to infiltrate the village. We don’t know exactly what happened but we surmise that the colony had wrapped itself around an old decrepit building and was the only thing holding it up, so when our man destroyed the control center, the structure collapsed. That was many years ago and I’ve never seen a sneeze like his since. Not until yours.”

“Are you happy in your present career?” asked Mirren.

The sudden shift of subject matter surprised George, but he managed to answer, “It’s okay.”

“Ms. Mirren asks because we are interested in having you work for us,” said McIness.

“Your sneeze would be invaluable. I can offer you a new and considerably more interesting and, I must warn you, considerably more dangerous job.”

“But you don’t know what I do,” said George.

“I don’t need to. In this day and age there is no more exciting and dangerous job than being a Ministry agent.”

“Well, I’m satisfied with what I’m doing,” replied George stubbornly.

“Then what are you doing out here in the middle of the night about to die from a fatal photon deficiency?”

“It was dark and I lost my way.”

“What’s your name?” asked Mirren.

“George DuBois.”

“George, old chap,” said McIness. “Our most difficult task right now is the containment of rogue nano colonies. We do our best to keep them isolated in the badlands, but they insist on escaping and, indeed, their incursions are increasing both in number and in depth. Someone with your talents would be an invaluable addition to our team. A veritable asset.”

What he was being told sounded good to George. The fact that someone regarded him as an asset was very gratifying. But it was all so new and at odds with his twenty-five years of quiet village life. It was all so ... foreign.

“So?” said Mirren, “Interested?”

“I don’t think it’s really for me. I think I’d rather go back home right now,” said George.

McIness sighed, “Alright, my boy, we’ll give you a lift back to the village.” And he turned and led George to the car.

When they arrived in the village, McIness unceremoniously woke up the Mayor and informed him that George needed a place to stay for the night. The Mayor looked worried but didn’t argue after McIness flashed his Ministry of BNA badge.

As he lay in the Mayor's spare room, a bright lamp shining on him, George felt something was not quite right. He should be happy to be back, safe and warm in the village, but he wasn't. He tried to figure out what emotion he was feeling but it eluded him. Finally he gave it up and shut himself down so the energy from the lamp could be fully absorbed.

A Decisive Sneeze

George sat in the front room of Mr. Tobias Smyth. He twiddled his thumbs and examined the furniture while he waited for Mr. Smyth. There wasn't much to examine. There were four Victorian style chairs, with painfully straight backs and uncomfortable seats, which were placed around a small square table. A single painting of a generic hunting scene adorned the wall and a pair of dark curtains was held open with frilly ended ropes.

That morning George had been lectured by the Mayor on the dangers of random sneezing. Of course the Mayor didn't use the "S" word, he called it a "violent nasal air expulsion."

"So George," he had concluded, "you will have to take nasal expulsion suppression classes before we can allow you back into normal society."

Which was why George was here. He'd never heard of "nasal expulsion suppression classes" but apparently this Mr. Smyth gave them. Mr. Smyth must be new to the village because George had never heard of him and in a little village of three hundred and fifty souls, everybody knew everybody else.

"You must be George."

George turned to see a man as thin and upright as his Victorian chairs. His eyes were sunken and his cheek bones very pronounced. He wore a pair of corduroy pants and a button

down shirt that seemed to hang off his emaciated frame like a shriveled old corpse dressed up for burial.

“Please be seated George,” he said and indicated one of the chairs.

George sat and Mr. Smyth sat himself primly in the chair across the table.

“So,” began Mr. Smyth, “you’ve been having problems with excessive nasal expulsions.”

For some reason this annoyed George. Before yesterday he would have felt embarrassed about the whole thing and would probably have welcomed classes to suppress his sneezes, but now he felt different. “The Mayor seems to think so,” he snapped.

“My dear chap. Your unfortunate expulsions yesterday caused fear amongst your fellow citizens.” There was something about Mr. Smyth’s voice that was so sickly sweet it felt like it was coating you with something sticky every time he spoke. George felt he had to either run away or become glued to the spot. “Don’t you feel a sense of guilt? Have you no shame for the terror you have brought to our lovely village?”

“Terror? What are you talking about? No one was terrified by my sneezes.”

Mr. Smyth sat up even straighter and sniffed in disapproval. “Please, my dear boy, don’t use the ‘S’ word. Let us refer to your unfortunate disability as ‘nasal expulsions.’”

“Disability!” Now George was getting angry. “It’s not a disability. It’s a talent.”

“Let us not raise our voices.” The tone was even more sugary than before. “Anger is not conducive to a quiet country life such as we experience here. Clearly you are embarrassed by your regrettable disability. But fear not, I understand, and I am here to help you overcome the barriers to you own happiness.”

George wanted to say something clever and cutting in response to this but all that came out was an indignant splutter which Smyth interpreted as agreement.

“That’s better.” He smiled what he must have considered a friendly and calming smile, that began and ended with an up-curve of the mouth but had no accompanying expression in the eyes. “There are exercises I have devised that will help you to suppress nasal expulsions. But before we begin let us have a nice cup of tea. I’ll go and fetch it.”

He rose and left the room.

George was now of two minds. The village was all he had known his entire life. The furthest away he’d ever been was Sir John’s estate, which was only a few miles. Otherwise all he knew of the outside world was from TV. He wanted to be accepted back into the village and yet ... the village was rather boring and after last night he had developed a certain pride in his ability to sneeze. Before he could think further on the matter, Mr. Smyth returned carrying a tea tray with two cups and a plate of cookies.

Mr. Smyth poured milk and tea into a cup for George and handed it to him. George raised it to his lips and was about to sip when ... the two generic paintings of hunting scenes caught his eye. He stopped dead. Two? There had only been one a moment ago. He glanced quickly around the room. There was a chest of drawers in the corner that had not been there before.

“Something wrong, my boy?” asked Mr. Smyth.

“Um, do you have any sugar?” asked George.

“One lump or two?”

And there on the tea tray, a sugar bowl filled with perfect white cubes had materialized.

George could feel his eyes bulging a little as he looked up at Mr. Smyth.

“You’re a rogue colony,” he whispered.

The effect this caused was immediate. Several streams of nano-cells shot out of the walls and ceiling and began inflating Mr. Smyth's thin frame. His body grew quickly, crushing the chair and pushing the table over.

George stood up, intending to make a run for it, but a huge hand grabbed him and pulled him towards an enormous mouth that was opening so it could bite off his head. There was no time to think so George acted instinctively: attention on inside of left nostril and ...

“Achoo!”

The shockwave hit the back of the huge mouth and drilled a hole right through so George could see the curtained window beyond. Smyth screamed in pain but a new stream of cells shot out of the floor and filled the hole in the head while George was still being pulled towards the mouth. He arched his neck so he could look up at the roof of the huge mouth and point his sneeze at the brain and ...

“Achoo!”

This time the shockwave drilled right through the huge head and took out a major portion of the control and coordination center. The body went into convulsions and George was thrown across the room and slammed against the wall.

Streams of nano-cells were flowing from everywhere in the room toward the flailing body, trying to repair the damage. George's left arm had been dislocated when he hit the wall and the pain was agonizing but he knew that his only chance was to strike again before the colony could repair itself. He held his left arm as still as possible with his right hand and headed toward Mr. Smyth.

The body was lying on its back, nano-cells flowing into the mouth and up into the damaged head. George kept to the edge of the room, avoiding the huge thrashing arms and

approached the head from behind. He was a few feet from the top of the head when the body jerked, rolled over and the huge eyes looked up at him. It gave a feral snarl and an arm lashed out. George dodged it and closed in. He had to be as close as possible to make this one count.

He let go of his left arm, grabbed the hair of the head with his right hand and put his face as close as possible to the head.

“Achoo!”

This time the entire head exploded in a shower of particles and George was thrown back against another wall. The pain was so intense that darkness overwhelmed him and he slumped to the floor unconscious.

A Valuable Sneeze

As he surfaced from a strange dream of hags and skeletons dancing in the front parlor, George was surprised to find himself in a bed in what must be a hospital, if the clinical atmosphere and crisp cleanliness were anything to go by.

His left arm felt sore and was in a sling, but otherwise he felt okay. He wasn't hooked up to anything so he got up and walked to the door. Outside there was a lot of activity; nurses and orderlies coming and going, patients in white smocks shuffling about and ... George suddenly realized he didn't recognize any of them. He was no longer in the village.

He turned to go back to bed so he could contemplate this revelation when the door opened and a familiar voice said, “Glad to see you up, my boy.”

It was McIness.

“I drop you off at your village, all peaceful and quiet as the grave, and next thing I know you're causing mayhem again.”

“There was another rogue colony,” said George defensively.

“Don’t worry, my boy. We of the Ministry are not as dumb as we look. There you were lying unconscious in a dilapidated building surrounded by piles of writhing, uncoordinated nano-cells. As Sherlock Holmes would say, ‘the conclusion was obvious.’”

George had returned to his bed and McIness sat himself down on the edge.

“That’s the good news. The bad news is that your village doesn’t want you back. You’ve scared the shit out of them, if you’ll pardon my French.”

The news didn’t surprise George and strangely it didn’t worry him either. He found himself smiling.

“What’s this?” enquired McIness. “Smiling? Not disconsolate at the loss of all those people you’ve known for so many years? No tears of sadness at your banishment? Why, this is an interesting turn of events.”

George felt something bubbling up inside him and he began to laugh.

“‘Curiouser and curiouser,’ said Alice,” said McIness. “Does this mean you may reconsider my offer?”

George’s laughter slowly subsided and he gave McIness a happy smile.

“Yes,” he said, “yes, it does.”

McIness smiled back and held out his hand.

“In that case, let me officially welcome you and your sneeze to the team.”

And they shook on it.